



# The Comparable Worlds of Calves and School Bullying

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a light-hearted example of how a behavioural intervention, used in the animal world to reduce bullying, might be adapted and applied to reduce bullying among students. Based on observations of bullying among calves, effective strategies to reduce bullying are based on acknowledging that bullying is occurring, and recognising that the victim is unable to stop the bullying without support.

## Practice Paper

### Keywords

*Behaviour problems, bullying, intervention strategy, peer rejection, school based intervention, school violence, victimisation.*

## THE CALF-WORLD

Having too much grass on our lifestyle block, we purchased six heifer calves from the local sale-yards. They came from five different lots and ranged in age from a suspected one to three days. Four were black, one was red and white, and one was black and white. So as to distinguish between the black calves, we named them Heather, Dot, Stripe and Stinky. Within days both desirable and undesirable characteristics began to emerge. The black and white – now named Freida - developed into a 'sucker'; Stripe, her target, became the 'suckee'. Freida was fixated with Stripe's umbilical area and she would aim for it at every opportunity. As Freida's attention continued, Stripe would stand passively, unresisting. Her ears hanging down, her body slumped forward, she appeared depressed. When Freida was pulled off her, Freida would rejoin the other four calves while Stripe would sit metres away, alone. On the rare occasion when Stripe approached the group, they rebuffed her and she would go off on her own again. Even Stinky, the smallest calf and next lowest on the pecking order, ostracised her. As the days passed, Freida's attacks continued. I sought advice from "real" farmers and was told this behaviour was normal among calves; that eventually Freida would grow out of it. In the meantime, Stripe's umbilical area prolapsed, her malaise increased and she stopped feeding from the calfeteria. Fearing for her well-being, we separated her from the other calves, and attempted to hand-feed her warm milk, but she showed little interest. The saddest little animal I had ever seen, Stripe's will to live was diminishing. I concluded that without intervention, we were going to lose her. Freida the bully, or Stripe the victim, would have to go.

We opted instead, for an intervention that began with a day of small, 2-hourly feeds of Vytrate (an electrolyte replacer) to build up Stripe's energy levels. We then put her in the main paddock with three of the calves: Stinky (the smallest), Dot (Dot and Stripe had come from the same lot) and Janice (the friendliest calf). Freida was put into a nearby paddock with Heather, the largest and most dominant calf. Their night shelter was divided into two parts. Each night and during bad weather, Freida was put into one side with one of the other calves (never Stripe or Heather) while the other four calves had the other side. With Freida no longer having access to Stripe, her umbilical area began to heal. While she would hang back while the others fed, she began to show interest in the calfeteria and allowed herself to be coaxed into drinking the warm milk. In the meantime, in the neighbouring paddock, Heather was losing her dominance and one morning I saw Freida sucking at Heather's umbilical area, and Heather was submitting to it. While it was tempting to, at best put Freida by herself, at worst send her to the 'works', we determined to give it one more go. We decided to put the six calves back together.

Within minutes of being together as a herd, Freida made a beeline for Stripe. But we were prepared. To deter her, each time her head went under Stripe's stomach, she was distracted using a variety of methods (e.g. a loud noise) whilst we simultaneously yelled out, "NO!" Looking for patterns and possible reasons for the bullying behaviour, we noted the times she showed interest in sucking and found that an hour before and after her milk feed (they were fed at 6.30 am and 5 pm) were the riskiest times whilst there were long blocks of time when she just grazed or slept. Unsure about her behaviour during the night, we bedded her by herself, rotating one of the other calves (never Stripe) to keep her company. For an hour before and after feeding, we stood on guard, ready to intercept when necessary. During those hours we stood among the calves, Stripe was given lots of positive attention. This included speaking softly, stroking, and scratching her under the chin and neck which she loved. The other calves would come close to us seeking the same attention and in this way Stripe became one of a group of five, whilst Freida held back. Within days, calling out the word "NO!" was sufficient to deter Freida's unacceptable behaviour.

While Stripe was now happily resting, grazing, playing and bouncing among the herd, Freida was wary of us and we had to rebuild her trust. This was done slowly over time, beginning with close proximity, soft talking and eventually, she allowed us to stroke her neck. While she would occasionally go to suck at Stripe's umbilical area, either Stripe would move away or within seconds Freida would lose interest. Three weeks after the interventions began, all six calves were contentedly cohabitating together.

## THE SCHOOL-WORLD

So, what can we, as humans, learn from this interaction among calves? While bearing in mind that humans experience life in different ways to bovines, there are some similarities between the way that the calves acted and the social interactions we observe with children. The calves' responses illustrated some important aspects of the development of human relationships.

Whilst bullying is deliberately harmful behaviour repeated over a period of time by a person or group who target a less powerful person as the victim (Carroll-Lind & Kearney, 2004), it usually involves one child directing aversive behaviour to another child that physically or emotionally harms or intimidates. It is repetitious and characterised by relationships with an asymmetrical power hierarchy. In other words, the bully has more power than the victim does. There is evidence that peer-on-peer types of abuse, or bullying, has an important relationship to homicide and suicide (Hazler & Carney, 2000). Most prevalent in school settings, bullying takes place during the primary school years, but it can also occur during the secondary school years (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002; Maxwell & Carroll-Lind, 1997).

As a special education advisor who has worked alongside children exhibiting severe behaviours within the school setting, by observing the role of a perceived "bully" and "victim" in the contained world of a few calves, I gained some insight into how school personnel might possibly intervene in school-world bullying. The intervention would follow a set of procedures and is based on the fundamental principle that the intervener has some standing in the school. The higher your ranking and status with the students, the greater chance for the intervention to succeed.

First, you have to recognise that bullying is actually occurring, identify the primary bully and any secondary bullies (i.e. copy cats, or who Eddy, Reid and Fetrow (2001) refer to as the "observing non-participants"), and acknowledge the victim. Bullies use rough play to establish their dominance in the social hierarchy, and they selectively choose less tough students to exploit as they publicly demonstrate their physical and/or social prowess (Farmer, 2000). Be mindful that a secondary bully may initially appear to be the primary bully as many primary bullies are clever enough to manipulate a suggestive peer (Cameron & Woods, 2004).

Secondly, you need to be consciously aware that the victim will no longer have the personal resources to be able to stop the bullying from happening and needs immediate intervention. By the time it has come to your attention that someone is being bullied, in all probability there will have been a history behind the bullying behaviour and the victim does not have the power to resist or negotiate (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002; McEvoy & Welker, 2001). There is almost always evidence of damage caused by the bullying. While boys are more likely to use physical aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships through verbal and psychological intimidation (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002; Simmons, 2002). In Stripe's case, there were both physical and emotional injuries.

Now that you have identified the three main players: the primary bully, secondary bullies, and victim, focus on providing the victim with "healing" time where s/he can recover energy and begin to feel heard and supported. Use this time to plan and prepare for your strategy around the bullying. To empower the victim, involve him/her in the planning stage. A suggested strategy:

- (a) In the short term, keep the victim and primary bully apart. This could be achieved by putting the bully in with stronger/older peers. The bully should be informed of the unacceptable bullying behaviour and the need for the intervention, but s/he should not be punished, as this will impact back on the victim.
- (b) With supports, keep the victim in with the original peer group (this includes the secondary bullies)
- (c) Create opportunities for the victim to mix with similar-interest peers.
- (d) Make occasions where the bully and victim are together as part of a natural group.
- (e) Use positive reinforcement (verbal and body language) for acceptable behaviours emitted from the victim, primary and secondary bullies.
- (f) Identify pro-social peers of the victim who could play a role in supporting him/her.
- (g) Be vigilant for signs of recurring bullying behaviours and when it reappears, make a stand to demonstrate that it is unacceptable.
- (h) Privately and frequently praise the victim for his/her resilience.
- (i) Empower the victim with strategies and supports when targeted for further bullying.
- (j) Identify the moral reasoning behind the bullying behaviour; what satisfaction does the bully derive from singling out the victim?
- (k) Privately and frequently praise the bully for his/her personal growth and strength of character in accepting rather than harming someone who is different from him/herself.
- (l) Praise the secondary bullies for their part in reducing bullying in the school.

- (m) Publicly praise the victim's peer group for their role in reducing bullying in the school.
- (n) Maintain a positive relationship with all parties, the primary and secondary bullies, the victim and the peer-support group.
- (o) Stay vigilant, watching the victim for evidence of surreptitious bullying.

While following these procedures is likely to have a positive outcome, the most effective intervention to support the victim against further bullying is most probably your willingness to be seen to be "doing something". Carroll-Lind and Kearney's (2004) study on bullying indicated that there is a clear link between students' perception that school personnel are making an effort regarding bullying and the occurrence of bullying within a school.

Many "real" farmers, no doubt like many school personnel, might argue that intervention on behalf of one individual victim is too much trouble, given how many for whom they are responsible. However, like the story of the boy who threw the stranded starfish back into the sea, timely and appropriate intervention makes a difference to the one who is suffering. And for that individual, it is worth the trouble.

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